

70 Minnesota UMC clergy would bless gay unions

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Some 70 United Methodist clergy have signed a statement saying they would offer the church's blessing to any prepared couples desiring a same-sex marriage. Officiating at any such unions could bring punishment in the UMC court system, but a bishop said that simply making a statement of support for same-sex unions is not a violation.

The declaration, made June 1 at the end of a clergy meeting of the Minnesota Annual Conference in St. Cloud, portends renewed struggles over LGBT policies at the next quadrennial United Methodist meeting in Tampa in the spring of 2012.

Methodists have debated issues relating to homosexuality since 1972 and have turned thumbs down on ordination of gay people and on same-sex unions even as other mainline Protestant denominations have moved toward acceptance. Observers say, however, that the growing proportion of overseas Methodist delegates in legislative meetings held every four years guarantees continued rejection of change.

Dozens of retired UMC bishops have called for change, most recently in January when 36 called for dropping the bars to gay and lesbian clergy.

In St. Cloud, Bruce Robbins, pastor of Hennepin Avenue UMC in Minneapolis, made a statement that read in part: "We realize that our church's discriminatory policies tarnish the witness of the church to the Word, and we are complicit." The statement that Robbins presented unofficially June 1 garnered about 40 signatures—a number that grew to 70 later, reported United Methodist News Service.

Minnesota Area Bishop Sally Dyck said that merely making a statement of support is not a punishable offense, according to the 2008 Book of Discipline.

"Our church is not of one mind," Dyck said in the clergy session. Families, churches and communities "differ in their understanding about the way to go forward."